

# Who is Jesus Christ?

Hugh Ross Mackintosh \*

1917

113

MOST people who lived 2000 years ago are now only rather faint shadows, but it is no exaggeration to say that we know Jesus Christ better than any other figure of antiquity. We know Him much more intimately, for example, than Socrates or Cicero or Julius Cæsar. Each age and nation understands Him by a sort of instinct, and to-day, thanks to historical inquiry, we understand Him better than ever. Everything about Him is so entirely human. The Gospels narrate incidents happening to people just like ourselves, in a world just like our world. "Jesus," it has been well said, "walked the streets of Capernaum like any carpenter's son. His clothes were what other people wore; His bearing was not noticeably peculiar. Except for a short time of His life, He went out and in unnoticed, one of the millions of the poor and

---

\**Who is Jesus Christ?*, The Church and the War: Tracts for To-Day 15 (Edinburgh: The United Church of Scotland, 1917). Original version available on the Internet Archive. This version updated June 3, 2017.

humble." Notwithstanding His being so far above the very best of us, we are at home in His presence. If we met Him to-day, and He stopped to talk to us, we should feel happier for the meeting.

114 Christians give to Jesus the supreme place. That this is not arbitrary or fortuitous is clear from the fact that, whoever He really was, at this hour His influence strongly pervades the world and myriads of people wear His uniform and His stamp. If we question men and women whose faith in God is joyful and unfaltering, they tell us frankly that they owe this to Jesus Christ. In fact, we can trace the main stream of goodness, purity, prayer, and self-sacrifice right back from our day to a Man who died in the first century. That sort of moral life has little or no existence in countries where Jesus' name is unfamiliar. Thus, as we look backward, seeking to explain how the world we live in has learnt and in part practised nobler ideals than those of brutish animal struggle, we see, away there at the originating source, the figure of Jesus. The best part of the higher movement has flowed from Him, and His influence has kept it true to type.

Somebody once asked a great scholar what books he ought to read in order to get acquainted with Jesus Christ. "Well," said the other, after thinking hard, "I expect on the whole I should begin with the Gospel of St. Matthew; next (here he paused for a while) I should go on to the Gospel of St. Mark; afterwards (smiling) I should take up the Gospel of St. Luke." The advice was good. The Gospels are in

fact our best sources. And the man who determines to read through the Gospel of Mark slowly and attentively, say a chapter every day, will have an unusual experience. By the end he will take a new view of himself, and Jesus will have become a very real person. Let us try to put down one or two impressions about Jesus which will undoubtedly have forced themselves upon his mind.

I. Jesus exerted an extraordinary influence on His companions. In the story of the world, there is nothing in the least like the way in which He changed their old thoughts about themselves, and their neighbours, and God. Most of all about God. At present men everywhere are wistfully searching for the right principles of human relationship, and for that we cannot do better than return to Jesus, who alone seems to possess the secret. Social differences had for Him no value whatever. Neither had racial prejudice. Face to face with Him, men grew conscious that He was reading character to the depths, probing motives, catching unspoken prayers; and all this not in the least with the cruel penetration of cold-steel intelligence, but simply by personal love. At the same time, He was quite open-eyed about things low and mean and base in their lives. His judgment of wrong had a terrible severity. His holiness burned with a white scorching flame; nothing foul could live near it. "He told me all things that I ever did," is the confession of one who spent half an hour with Him. But in spite of this uncompromising rightness of mind—rather,

perhaps, because of it—men were able to place complete confidence in His affection for them, and, in case after case, flung themselves upon His strength for protection against themselves and the desperate power of evil habit. It was the same with people who longed to make the world a kinder and better place. Instinctively they felt that Jesus would help them to their purpose.

Years ago a working-men's club were talking over a difficult question of management, about which opinions differed keenly. One man got up with a very short speech. "All I can say is that I'll follow Mr. — anywhere." That is how His companions gradually came to stand toward Jesus. They had watched Him closely, as none can do so well as men who have lived together for weeks at a time. They had seen His steady, patient friendliness, His forgetfulness of self, His exhibition to the least and lowest of true respect, sympathy, good-will. He obviously cared for them with the whole force of His nature. It was far easier, they soon discovered, to believe in God and deny oneself when He was present than when He was not. He understood them, and He never despised even those who despised themselves. So they fell under His influence, till they knew they would rather die than leave Him. "Master," one of them at length exclaimed, "to whom can we go but to Thee? Thou hast words of eternal life."

116

This result was no surprise to Jesus. He wished them to become His followers. He longed that they

should feel as He felt about life, about other people, and about God. There was a warmth in His soul which He sought to impart to His friends, and He came so close to them just in order that the fire of His loving heart might kindle theirs. But He wanted no band of adoring disciples for selfish purposes of His own. He wanted them for one supreme reason—because He was sure that by learning loyalty to Him they would belong to God.

The disciples, however, could not have felt this devotion to Jesus unless He had deserved perfect confidence by His character. Any weakness there would of course have ruined hero-worship. They saw Him living His life in the same tempting, defiled world as themselves—facing its allurements, ignoring its flatteries, enduring its trials. Clearly He had to struggle; the maintenance of His integrity was a constant fight. More than once they caught His agonised voice as He prayed about His troubles. Sometimes they could do nothing more than stand afar off, guessing at His pain. Eventually they came to the unhesitating conclusion that His character had never once been touched by evil. They said to each other that this Man was not, like them, a sinner. No stain ever touched Him. He was in a class by Himself. He had never suffered from a bad conscience or had to speak the bitter words of penitence all the rest of us have to utter.

117

Such, very briefly, is the impression Jesus left on His companions. It was an impression of utter kindness, insight, and purity. Any of us can see for him-

self that they were right. But so far we have considered the facts only on one side.

II. Jesus irresistibly leads our thoughts to God. The Father and He somehow belong so much together that it is impossible to think truly about either apart from the other.

Here let us begin with the point last mentioned—Jesus' complete freedom from sin. Inevitably the disciples must have begun to ask how it happened that He invariably won in the fight with temptation. Soon they perceived that His perpetual victory was no accident: He won through His unclouded trust in the Father. God was with Him all the time. Not once was that companionship broken. Jesus Himself helped them to see this; He told them—on very rare occasions—some extraordinary things regarding His intimate fellowship with God, and every now and then He would point out what an enormous difference such a fellowship with God would make for any one who was daring enough to claim it in childlike prayer. It had not occurred to them that God was at least as anxious to be friendly as they could be, but under Jesus' influence they began the experiment of trusting God with something of Jesus' own unreserve—and *the thing worked*. The Father came to be the great reality of life.

But more. It was not merely that Jesus told them about God in words: His character was simply a portrait of God Himself fashioned in human materials. In Italy there is a famous church with a lovely roof; but the roof is so high that the monks have placed

a mirror in the floor, and now the traveller by looking into it can survey the glory up above. Just so the men round Jesus grew convinced that to know what

God is like, we have only to look at their Master. 118  
There is no difference between the two. Could there possibly be such good news as this?—God is exactly like Jesus.

Take an instance of how this new insight worked. As we have seen, Jesus produced in His associates a curious feeling that, morally speaking, they were failures. Along with their glad discovery that God and Jesus are so like, went a painful conviction that personally they were too unworthy for God to bear them near Him. They saw more than ever how different they were from the men they ought to be. And it was now that they first realised for how much Christ counted in their lives. For precisely when they began to feel ashamed, and the hatefulness and tragedy of their sin was standing out more clearly hour by hour, and all hope seemed gone, just then His treatment of them relieved their dread. When Peter sank down at His feet with the words: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man," Jesus would not depart; instead, He said, "Fear not." His attitude was at once so stern and so sympathising, so holy and so affectionate, that they remembered He was like God, and God like Him, and in a flash they realised that through Jesus' love God was forgiving them. They did not as yet perceive that Jesus' attitude would one day cost His life, but they understood quite well He was doing for them the

greatest service conceivable. He spoke the word of pardon, He blotted out the past, He opened up the future, He gave peace to conscience, He imparted hope to broken men, He started them in the career of loving their neighbour—all because at bottom He was doing the biggest thing of all, namely, leading them back into fellowship with God. And this Christ is still doing innumerable lives. He can do it now for you and for me.

119 Surely this is an amazing and cheering truth, that if we want to know what God is really like, the answer is Jesus Christ. For as we contemplate the vastness of the universe, the mysteries of infinite space and unending time, the wide world full of pain and wrong and shame, we soon grow confused, and cannot tell what to think of God. The Unseen Power seems too far away and—if we are to be entirely frank—too calmly indifferent to the things we most care about, for us to speak hopefully to Him in prayer. But it helps wonderfully to go and look at Christ again. Here, we are quite sure, is One highest in the highest realm we know. Therefore, as we gaze at His career of life and love and death, we say: There is my God, to whom I may commit myself and all for whom I pray, in perfect confidence. Through inner companionship with His living presence, I grasp and hold the Father.

Jesus died, as everybody knows; but immediately afterwards, His former associates began to go about saying that He had appeared to them alive. Exactly what happened cannot be told in detail,



but, unless history has no meaning whatever, He did somehow escape from death and resume His liberating influence over men. He had Himself looked forward to this. He anticipated that His relations to the disciples would continue, on an even profounder level of intimacy than before. Truth, as the saying goes, is stranger than fiction. It certainly in this case was so. And the experience of the most typical Christian people from the outset has fully corroborated Jesus' anticipations. They have discovered, amid life's sternest facts, that He is no bygone figure of ancient times. On the contrary, they still receive from Him, day after day, the same kind of support as from the sympathy of a trusty friend.

These are startling assertions to make concerning whom historians date in the first century of our era. Jesus Christ perished as a felon in a corner of the Roman Empire, yet here He still is in the midst of men. His influence is growing with such rapidity that those who never used to mention Him now say we must look to Him to abolish things like war; He is a present power to conscience and heart; He lays hold upon us with strong apprehending love and brings us to the Father. If He grew on the soil of human nature, as merely human, could we thus commit life and destiny to His hands? Is it not more reasonable to say that He represents God to us because He is Himself divine? Yes: in His personal love and purity very God touches and saves us. Little wonder that, with adoring praise, men see in Him "God manifest in the flesh," and in the Cross of Cal-

vary find the Eternal bearing at His own cost the sin  
of the whole world.